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Central Intelligence Agency



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DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

1 February 1983

Coping with Class Struggle: Beijing's Dilemma

Summary

Recent press articles and speeches on class struggle in China illustrate the difficulties Beijing is having in reconciling certain basic Marxist principles with its reform program. The articles have attempted to redefine the nature of class struggle in China today to meet the policy needs of the reformers in three areas--rehabilitation of intellectuals, fighting economic crime, and resisting "bourgeois liberalism" and other corrupting influences. In our opinion, the reformers under Deng Xiaoping believe they cannot ignore the subject of class struggle. It is a fundamental Marxist principle, and unless redefined, opponents of reform will use it against them and their policies. The concept also has strong psychological appeal for the least-skilled workers and peasants in China, who fear the renewed emphasis on expertise will limit their chances of improving both their economic and political status. This attitude could be exploited by those opposed to the reforms to hinder implementation and force compromises. [redacted]

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In our opinion, this effort to redefine class struggle will not be convincing and probably will not significantly advance the leadership's goals of rehabilitating intellectuals and stemming corruption. Moreover, the class struggle issue raises problems in regard to the recovery of Hong Kong and Taiwan, areas which as hotbeds of capitalism are sensitive to Chinese discussions of this question. [redacted]

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This memorandum was prepared by [redacted] the Domestic Policy Branch of the Office of East Asian Analysis, Deputy Directorate of Intelligence. Questions and comments are welcome and may be directed to the author [redacted]

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A New Definition

Attention to class struggle has been closely associated with periods of political violence in China, especially the Cultural Revolution, and is out of step with the leadership's stress on order and stability. To deal with the issue, the reformers argue that class struggle in the old mass movement sense is no longer necessary in China because the exploiting classes have been virtually eliminated. They are pushing the line laid down at the Third Plenum in 1978 that production, not politics, has become the key link and thus class struggle should be directed at those elements that retard production. []

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Intellectuals

The new line on class struggle holds that intellectuals, reviled as the "ninth stinking class" in the Cultural Revolution, have been transformed through 40 years of socialist education and are now workers too. Because their talents are crucial to China's modernization, a major purpose of recent class struggle discussions has been to overcome the anti-intellectualism still rife in China. In his 12th Congress speech, Hu referred to the three main forces of socialism as workers, peasants, and intellectuals, rather than the classic formulation of workers, peasants, and soldiers. The new formulation, which has become standard, in effect asserts that there is no difference between mental and physical labor and class differences based on education no longer exist in China. []

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The pronouncements on intellectuals and class struggle are intended to support more tangible expressions of the policy on intellectuals. When they were attacked as bourgeois elements during the Cultural Revolution, many intellectuals were subjected to humiliating public trials, physically abused, thrown out of their jobs, and sent to do manual labor. Now intellectuals are being restored to their old jobs with their salaries, living quarters and working conditions improved. In some cases, they are being given compensatory payments for abuses suffered in the Cultural Revolution. Beijing is using its new categorization of classes in an attempt to justify this policy as one of fairness, not favoritism, toward intellectuals. []

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Economic Crimes

Articles explaining the new policies on class struggle have linked it to the attack on economic crime by arguing that, although exploitive classes have been eliminated, class struggle in China still exists between the "legitimate" and "illegitimate" classes--the law-abiding and the criminal. The Shanghai press has singled out as class enemies smugglers, embezzlers, thieves, and those who take bribes, because they rob the people and hinder China's economic progress; class struggle against them is legitimate. By this argument, status as a class enemy is

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determined by an individual's actions and not by his class origin, an interpretation which is a far cry from classical Marxism-Leninism. [REDACTED]

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Bourgeois Liberalism and Foreign Enemies

As part of the effort to combat the undesirable side effects of some reforms, Beijing has included under class struggle the struggle against bourgeois liberalism and corrupt western political, social, and artistic ideas. Hu Yaobang in his speech at the 12th Party Congress strongly defended China's open door policy, under attack in some quarters of the leadership, but he also warned of the ideological corruption that could result from increased contact with the West. Hu made the point that class struggle will continue to exist and may even intensify because the Chinese people live in a "complicated international environment" where capitalism and other forces hostile to socialism seek to corrupt and sabotage the country. We believe Hu and other leaders are most concerned about the appeal of "bourgeois lifestyles" for China's youth and also feel a need to protect their flanks from critics of the open door. [REDACTED]

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Problems

We believe Beijing's attempts to alter the traditional view of class struggle and defuse anti-intellectualism have not met with great success. [REDACTED] workers and peasants object that intellectuals are being given preferential treatment, and cadre resist the policy both to preserve their influence and on ideological grounds. Strikes and demonstrations in various parts of China have forced postponement of some scheduled pay increases for teachers. Opposition to the policy is sufficiently strong to force central authorities to reinforce directives calling for improved implementation. They refer to numerous problems in party work on intellectuals, charging that many cadre continue to view intellectuals as unreliable [REDACTED]

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From the intellectuals' point of view, the regime still has a long way to go in assuaging memories of Cultural Revolution excesses and proving that its moderate policies will last. Beijing has on occasion complicated the task by sending mixed signals. For example, the phrase "Let a hundred flowers bloom"--codewords for loosening controls on intellectuals--was dropped from the final draft of the new constitution, which disturbed intellectuals. Some leaders have argued, lamely in our view, that the new relaxed policy toward intellectuals is now so basic that it does not require specific mention. [REDACTED]

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Intellectuals have complicated the problem for Beijing by their tendency to exceed the guidelines every time restrictions on the arts are relaxed. The dilemma Beijing faces is that, given the terms which frame political arguments in China, any

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criticism of individual intellectuals very often develops into a criticism of intellectuals as a class--a situation Beijing wants to avoid. [REDACTED]

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In our view, lumping the campaign against corruption under the rubric of class struggle is unlikely to produce the result Beijing is seeking--pumping life into a campaign that was all but stillborn. While there is plenty of resentment against corruption, it does not evoke the same zeal that old-style class struggle did. The targets are too numerous, too diffuse, and too likely to be relatives. [REDACTED]

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Linking class struggle with resisting foreign corruption presents potential problems for the reformers; opponents of the open door policy can use it to argue against further liberalization of contacts with the West. Some of the top leaders are unhappy with growing western influence in many spheres of Chinese society--music, dress, art, even politics. They are also worried about increased dependence on the West. The reformers recognize the problem but are denying that "bourgeois liberalism" is a necessary consequence of the opening to the West. [REDACTED]

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Potentially much more troublesome is the discussion of class struggle in connection with the recovery of Taiwan and Hong Kong. Some articles on class struggle, possibly picking up on the reunification theme in Hu's Congress speech, have said that exploitive capitalist classes still exist in the unrecovered areas of the motherland--Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macao--and must be struggled against. This argument most often appears in the provincial press, not in the national media, indicating that it is not the official view as yet. Indeed, it flies in the face of Beijing's official line that Hong Kong's and Taiwan's social and economic systems need not change as a result of reunification. However, provincial versus national press treatment, official versus unofficial pronouncements, are distinctions that will not be made by residents of Taiwan and Hong Kong. In our view, discussion of this point, even in the provincial press, which does circulate in Hong Kong, can only increase the nervousness in the colony and complicate Beijing's efforts to regain control. [REDACTED]

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The class struggle discussion illustrates the difficulties Beijing is having reconciling its economic and political reforms with ideology and traditional attitudes. The pragmatic policies of Deng and his allies must proceed within a Communist framework; many of the reforms advocated deviate sharply from accepted Marxist thinking. Constant harping on the socialist character of the reforms indicates that the reformer's rather forced reinterpretation of Marxist truth continues to meet with scepticism from old-line conservatives and that the reformers consider themselves vulnerable on the ideological front. [REDACTED]

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A further complication confronting the reformers is the legacy of Mao Zedong's theories, which gave class struggle an almost mystical importance. The reform leaders have been deemphasizing Maoism but they cannot totally repudiate Mao--he is too important a figure in the victory of the party. They have adopted the tactic of praising Mao's early writings while treating his role in the Cultural Revolution as the great mistake of an aging leader. This approach has its dangers; many of the concepts the reformers find threatening, including class struggle, are integral parts of Mao's thought dating from the 1930's, and not solely products of the Cultural Revolution. The leadership is going to have to walk a fine line on these issues or risk the unwanted side-effects of providing its opponents with ammunition, confusing its friends, and undermining confidence in the direction and stability of its policies. [REDACTED]

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